

## *Something New Has Been Added: Aural Literacy and Libraries*

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The era in which monographs and serial publications constituted the predominant element of library collections has passed. Library collections now include a wide variety of formats to better serve their publics. In this paper I will discuss the emergence of another new medium, the "bookcassette," and its acceptance into the library's repertoire. The concept of listening comprehension is then introduced, and the implications of research in this field for library service is then indicated.

### *THE BOOKCASSETTE - ORIGINS*

Spoken-word sound recordings have been a feature of the recording industry since Thomas Edison first recorded "Mary Had a Little Lamb" in 1877. Edison, however, soon lost interest in the phonograph and recordings. Further development of sound recordings as a medium was the result of the efforts of Emile Berliner and others. Many commercial recordings through the golden age of sound recordings, 1900-30, were spoken-word recordings. Only with the improvement of recording equipment that ushered in the "electric age," 1925-48, did musical recordings with complete orchestras become the mainstay of the emerging recording industry.

Spoken-word sound recordings never completely disappeared. There has been a sizable educational market with annual sales of more than \$62 million.<sup>1</sup> Even within the commercial sector of the recording industry, spoken-word recordings of comedians such as Bob Newhart and Bill Cosby have been quite popular.

Another type of spoken-word recording with a long history is the recording of books and periodicals as a service to the blind, visually

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handicapped, or physically disabled. The Library of Congress began its talking-book program in October 1934. These recordings were on disk, and later on reel-to-reel tape. Both of these formats presented problems for patrons because the record players were large and cumbersome, while the reel-to-reel tape had to be threaded.

In 1963 the Phillips Company of the Netherlands invented the cassette, a tape recording format that held promise for these users because they were small, easy to handle (no threading), and required a relatively small and easily operated player.

The first bookcassettes were used by the Library of Congress. Its National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped began distributing cassette tapes in 1969. At approximately the same time, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind began recording books on cassette as well.

Shortly thereafter, others began to take advantage of this new recording format. The American Bar Association began in 1970 to develop continuing education materials on cassette. *Law Library Journal* started to include in each issue a list of all legal education materials available in cassette form. Titles were listed alphabetically by state, and within each state by title. Each entry indicated the source and price of the cassette.

Business also discovered the advantages of the audiocassette in the early 1970s. At that time, Valerie Noble identified eight audio-publishers of business information cassettes. This format was regarded as especially useful for salespersons who spent a large amount of time traveling. Through cassettes, they could receive updated training and memos from the home office. The topics ranged from *Managing and Selling Companies* (12 cassettes, \$300) from Advanced Management Resources, Inc. to *Executive Seminar in Sound*, a series of sixty-minute cassettes from Nation's Business.

Others discovered the cassette format in the 1970s. The Idaho State Library had 1,000 books on cassette and began recording on cassette some local interest periodicals—for example, *Idaho Wildlife Review*, *Idaho Yesterdays*, and *Incredible Idaho*. Distribution was limited, however, to the blind and physically handicapped. A more innovative use of the cassette was devised by the Southwestern Library Association's Continuing Education for Library Staffs in the Southwest Project. In 1976 the association began distributing the *Current Awareness Journal*, a sixty-minute cassette that included news of the profession, abstracts of current articles of interest, and new service ideas. The recording was done by professional actors.

In its first decade, the use of the cassette to record and distribute information was limited to the blind and physically handicapped, or to precisely defined audiences with precisely defined information needs. Patricia Lawson foresaw the potential of this new format but lamented the lack of titles then available for use with a broader audience. Lawson noted, though,

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that Voice Over Books had "begun the production of best sellers on cassettes. These condensations are dramatized by professional actors and cost about the same as hardcover books."<sup>2</sup>

Other commercial companies began to publish titles in the cassette format. Recorded Books and Books on Tape, pioneers in this new sound recording format, recorded unabridged versions of books on cassette. These recordings, lasting up to twelve hours, consisted of eight to twelve cassettes and were fairly expensive at \$80-100 per title. Income was generated from the sale of these cassette versions of books to the institutional market, libraries, schools, and so on, and from rentals (at \$11-12) to individuals. Into the early 1980s, the recording of unabridged versions of plays, poetry, drama, and fiction remained a very small business. Within even that circumscribed world, the focus remained on serving the needs of the blind, visually handicapped, and elderly.

Barriers in the form of time, price, and convenience would have to be overcome before the bookcassette would become a more significant medium. The time required to listen to a book was the easiest to resolve. Rather than record the complete text, one could record an abridged version of the print original. The abridging strategy, in turn, would result in a product that was convenient and less expensive than the unabridged recordings. Further technological developments, however, were required before the bookcassette in its current mode would emerge. The first of these was the introduction of the compact, lightweight cassette player, such as Sony's Walkman. The second step was the inclusion of cassette players in cars as standard equipment. These twin developments made it possible to listen to cassettes at any time—walking, jogging, sitting in a bus or subway, commuting in a car, or working in or outside the home. These technological advances virtually assured the emergence of the bookcassette.

### *BOOKCASSETTES DEFINED*

The bookcassette is a one- or two-cassette item that is generally an abridgement of a book. It has a duration of three hours maximum. They are currently priced at approximately \$14.95. Excluded from this definition are single cassettes with identical material recorded on each side (one with an advance tone for page turning), issued with the original book, either in hardcover or paperback. These items are known as book-and-cassette packages and are usually designed for the preschool through junior high school age groups. Bookcassettes are not released with the book or accompanying activities and are released as separate entities.

Not all bookcassettes are abridgments. There are some audio-publishers who only release complete versions of print titles on cassette. Bookcassettes may be a reading by the author of the work, or a reading of the work by a

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professional actor. Other bookcassettes are multivoiced recordings. Some are dramatizations complete with sound effects and background music. Multivoice recordings are done by actors who can assume a variety of voices for a greater number of characters. Published print titles featuring both dialogue and action are better suited for dramatic recordings. Authors relying on the narrative to develop their stories are more often read.

### *THE EMERGENCE OF THE BOOKCASSETTE*

While Walden Books had introduced a line of twenty-four titles in the book cassette format earlier, observers of publishing first began to note its development in 1984, when David Blaiwas identified eleven audio-publishers. These were small companies, such as Caedmon, Metacom, Newman Communications, and Recorded Books, that offered children's stories, classics, fiction titles, poetry, and a few biographies and nonfiction titles. The largest of these firms offered 200 titles. Bookstores did make them available to patrons, but they were not a significant portion of total sales.

In 1984 the bookcassette emerged. A new company, Brilliance, developed a technique for recording unabridged versions of works that reduced by half the number of cassettes required. Authors such as Jean Auel and Mario Puzo, who had refused to permit abridgments of their work to be recorded, could now be accommodated. The solution was to record on each of the two channels of each stereo track. Recording engineers invented a device to adjust the speed of the recording. Fewer cassettes were required, and the price for an unabridged recording of a title could be reduced. Brilliance began by recording fiction titles but has recently added some nonfiction titles in its "Health Talk Self Help" line.

By September 1985 *Publishers Weekly* could identify twenty-one audio-publishers. A number of major book publishers, such as Harper and Row, Random House, and Warner Communications, were entering the market and offering consumers classics and recent best-sellers in this new format. One bookcassette title, *Iacocca*, sold an impressive 50,000 units.

The next year, 1986, was really the turning point for the bookcassette. A number of rapid events ensured it would no longer be a curiosity. Audio-publishers formed a trade association, the Audio-Publishers Association. Sales were greatly aided when book clubs began to offer their members bookcassettes. Time-Life offered its members twenty-five titles from Caedmon, Listen for Pleasure, and Warner Audio. Book-of-the-Month club regularly offered its members audio titles, whereas Literary Guild did this only twice a year. Even specialty book clubs like the Get Rich Club, History Book Club, and Nostalgia Book Club began offering members audio titles in 1986. Book clubs for children operated by Scholastic and Harcourt Brace Javonovich included bookcassettes in their offerings as well. Secular

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publishers and religious publishers began releasing religious and inspirational titles in bookcassette format and placing them in both trade and Christian bookstores. Overall, 1986 was a very good year for audio-publishers. Even those specializing in unabridged recordings of titles did exceedingly well. Duval Hecht, founder of Books on Tape, reported a 25 percent growth rate, with sales of \$2.8 million in 1985 and \$3.5 million in 1986.

By May 1987 *Publishers Weekly* recognized the significance of audio-publishing by initiating a regular column to cover events and activities there. Houghton Mifflin consummated a deal with Brilliance for the publication of some of its titles in unabridged form. Even small presses—Butterfly Publishing, for example—began to issue bookcassette titles on self-hypnosis, subliminal persuasion, martial arts, as well as recorded lectures.

New marketing strategies were designed to broaden the consumer base for the medium. Simon and Schuster launched bookcassette versions of the "Star Trek" titles in the hope that the Trekkies would not only snap these up but, once exposed to the format, would return to purchase other audio titles. Other publishers began to release a bookcassette edition of their titles with each title's publication in paperback. Celebrity autobiographies—by Carol Burnett, Vanna White, and Chuck Yeager, for example—were simultaneously released in hardcover and bookcassette formats.

Simultaneous publication of hardcover and bookcassette editions of titles was expanded to well-known authors such as James Michener and John Jakes. Authors such as these had good records in the past and might attract others to the bookcassette form. Even a nonfiction title like Bob Woodward's *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987* was simultaneously published in hardcover and bookcassette. The narrowing of the time gap between the publication of the book and the bookcassette, combined with some cross-promotion, has been successful. By the end of 1987, bookcassettes were an estimated \$200 million market. Bookcassettes were being sold in 75 percent of the regional and independent bookstores surveyed by *Publishers Weekly*. The August 5, 1988, issue of *Publishers Weekly* contained the announcement of the fall titles. John Zinser identified more than forty audio-publishers. The listing of the individual titles to be released occupied fifteen pages. The bookcassette had arrived.

### *LIBRARIES AND BOOKCASSETTES*

Libraries generally had little to do with audiocassette recordings of books until recently. Libraries with the mission of serving the blind and physically handicapped had the most enduring relationship with the bookcassette. But these libraries restricted the use of recorded books and periodicals on cassettes to that carefully defined clientele. Few libraries offered recorded books on cassette to other patrons, but there were some exceptions.

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In the spring of 1969 the Los Angeles Public Library began an experimental program of circulating cassettes to patrons, but use was restricted to the library itself. The first report of the circulation of bookcassettes is at the Veterans Memorial Public Library in Bismark, North Dakota. James L. Denton, in the spring of 1972, made available to users three cassette series—First National City Bank's *Sound of the Economy*, *Fortune* magazine's *Executive Voice*, and *Nation's Business's Executive Seminars in Sound*. At the same time, the Suburban (Illinois) Library System established a cassette program by placing 6,279 cassette tapes in eight member libraries. Two-thirds of these were spoken-word recordings. The program was judged an immediate success, with an average circulation of between 3,500 and 4,000 per month for the first year.

Other innovative programs were begun by libraries in the 1970s and early 1980s. A local public library in England started to acquire cassette recordings of lectures by experts in areas of concern for local governments. These cassettes were made available to local government officials as another means of acquiring sufficient background information to vote intelligently on matters brought before them. The Cumberland County (North Carolina) Public Library introduced its "Information to Go" program in 1983. The library itself produced and distributed a series of cassettes on health, American literature, politics, the Bible, and other topic of interest. All of these were made available to all patrons. However, real strides in the use of spoken-word audiocassettes only took place after the technological developments had made the bookcassette a viable commercial medium.

In 1984 the Oskaloosa (Iowa) Public Library began to purchase and circulate bookcassettes made available by the then-emerging new audio-publishers. The idea was deemed an immediate success. "In the first six weeks the tapes circulated 175 times or an average of 3.7 circulations per title."<sup>3</sup> During its first full year of operation, the bookcassettes, reported Davis, "have accounted for a steady 2 percent of the total circulation though representing . . . .5 percent of the total collection."<sup>4</sup>

Subsequently, *Library Journal* has conducted a series of national surveys on the place of audiocassettes in library collections. The 1986 survey of public and academic libraries concluded, "What began as a craze had become a library."<sup>5</sup> Circulation of audiocassettes was substantial, often nearly 20 percent of the total circulation of the responding libraries, with average increases of 15-30 percent each year. In 1987 *Library Journal* broadened the scope of its survey to include some special libraries. The eighty public, academic, and special libraries responding indicated that their materials budgets allocated for the purchase of both audio and video materials was increasing an average of 12 percent per year, that the size of their collections continued to increase, and that circulation increased 13 percent over the previous year. The bookcassette had become a fixture in library collections.

*LISTENING AND READING*

Listening to a book or journal is not quite the same as reading the printed book or journal. They are related but not identical experiences. Both involve the reception of a message through some bodily earth station, the transmission of that message to the brain, and the decoding of the message by the brain into something meaningful to that individual. In reading, the bodily earth station is the eyes, the message is a series of symbols on a white page, and understanding occurs when the brain perceives that this particular group of symbols (cat) stands for a concept stored in its memory (a small, furry, four-legged animal with a long tail that drinks milk and purrs). In listening, the bodily earth station is the ear, the message is a sound or series of sounds in the open air, and comprehension occurs only if the brain associates the sound with an idea in its memory. Beyond the similarity in framework, these two communication activities are dissimilar.

Roger Sutton points out that "listening to a book requires an enormous amount of effort."<sup>6</sup> When you are reading print, you can afford to lose some concentration because you can always go back to an earlier point in the chapter or article and reconstruct, by rereading, any information that might have been lost. An additional advantage with print is that you can "backtrack to check a character name, go over a difficult (or enjoyable) passage two or three times, scan ahead to see if there is enough time to finish the chapter."<sup>7</sup> With a book or journal on cassette, there is no such cushion. The cassette tape will inexorably move along at one and seven-eighths inches per second. Even if the listener wanted to go back and pick up the threads of the narrative or information being presented, the lack of either an index or a table of contents for the bookcassettes makes the process difficult. For children, Sutton points out, this is more critical because they "can't look back at any page or a picture to clear up any confusion."<sup>8</sup>

There is some research that indicates that Sutton is correct in contending that different modes of presentation evoke different responses from individuals. To determine whether there were some persons who learned better from visual materials and others who learned better from oral presentations, Carol DeBoth and Roger Dominowski conducted an experiment with 160 college students. These investigators developed six lists of words that were randomly assigned to their subjects. One-half (eighty) were exposed first to an oral presentation, via a tape recorder, and then to a visual presentation, via a slide projector, of two lists of words. The other half of the subjects were first exposed to a list in the slide format, and then to a second list of words in the oral format. In both modes, the students were instructed to learn the words in the lists they were exposed to. They were then to list all the words that they were able to recall. If there were students who learned best from auditory presentations, their scores for the number of

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words they could recall from the list they heard on the tape should be significantly higher than their scores indicating the number of words they could recall from the list seen on a slide. The data did not support this hypothesis. These subjects did not fall into neat categories of audio and visual learners. On the basis of these findings, DeBoth and Dominowski suggested that the selection of format should rest on its effectiveness (i.e., its ability to relay information).

Marshall McLuhan, William Allen, and Lester Ashiem have all suggested that the identification of each medium's strengths and weaknesses is the key to its most effective use. Unfortunately, Schramm's analysis of research indicated that "there is almost a complete lack of studies to ascertain under what circumstances or for what purposes one medium may be superior to another."<sup>9</sup> In the last decade, however, there has been some research that tends to indicate that oral presentation of information is a different experience from other modes of presenting the same information.

Meringoff addressed this issue with a study of children's reactions to a story both read to them and seen as a film. Meringoff hypothesized that children experiencing the film version of the story would be more aware of the action and characters. Those to whom the story was read would remember more of the language and make more inferences about the story.

Twenty-four 6-8-year-olds and twenty-four 9-10-year-olds were the subjects. "A Story, a Story" in both picture-book form and film form was selected. The subjects were randomly assigned to a reading of the picture book or to a viewing of the film. After each child had either listened to or seen the story, she or he was asked to put in sequence pictures from the story, to comment about the story, to estimate the length of time that transpired in the story, and, finally, to estimate the distances between the places mentioned in the story.

As expected, the children who had seen the film recalled actions, and those read to remembered the language. Younger children who were read the story were better able to place the pictures in proper sequence than those who had seen the film. Among the older children, the 9-10-year-olds, this situation was reversed. Those children exposed to the film version made more inferences based on visual information, estimated that the story took place over a shorter period of time, and estimated the distances depicted in the story as much shorter than did those to whom the story was read. Meringoff's results indicated that children limited to the oral rather than the visual format had significantly different responses to items in the post-test. Listening seemed to be a unique experience.

Beagles-Roos and Gat replicated the Meringoff study. The subjects here were forty-eight children in two age groups, 6.5-8-year-olds and 9-10.5-year-olds. In this study, two stories were used, "A Story, a Story" and "Strega Nona." Both stories were recorded on cassette and were available as



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animated films. Children were randomly assigned to the audiocassette format or film format of one story in one session, and to the opposite medium for the second story in their second session. In this study, one of the investigators left the room while the child listened to the cassette or saw the film and returned upon its conclusion to ask the child about the story. The responses were recorded and then analyzed.

These investigators expected that, when exposed to the cassette version of one story, the children would recall more of the language and dialogue. When exposed to the film of the second story, the same children would recall the action more vividly. The ordering of pictures, it was anticipated, would be more accurate when done after the subjects had viewed the film. Inferences made after viewing the film of the story would be based on actions. When the subject had just listened to the cassette version of a story, it was expected that inferences would be based on language, dialogue, and outside sources.

The data suggested that, when experiencing the cassette version of a story, the children were more aware of the language and this was the basis of their inferences. After seeing the film of either story, subjects recalled more characters and more details. They also more accurately organized pictures based on the story and made more inferences based on actions. This replication of Meringoff had similar results and adds weight to the contention that listening results in different perceptions than other modes of relaying information.

Horowitz and Samuels were primarily interested in examining the unity theory, which suggests that reading and listening are identical skills. Good readers, it follows, are those persons who can decode print as easily as they do sound. If it could be demonstrated that this might not be the case, the linking of reading and listening comprehension would require reexamination.

These investigators selected thirty-eight sixth-graders, twenty of whom were judged to be good readers. The remainder were considered poor readers. These subjects were first to listen to and then read selected passages—one judged easy, the other judged difficult—from four texts. After reading or listening to one of the passages, each of the students was asked what he remembered. Each idea indicated was recorded as a score.

The data suggested that, when the easy passages were considered, there was no difference between the groups of readers in listening comprehension, but a significant difference in recall for reading comprehension. A similar pattern developed with the more difficult passages.

Horowitz and Samuels concluded that good and bad readers do not have significant differences in general comprehension. The major difference between the two groups of readers seemed to lie in the area of decoding skills. Listening comprehension, it follows, is not identical with reading comprehension. These are allied but not identical skills.

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These three investigations suggest that listening comprehension will require separate attention. This skill cannot be overlooked. The Crittendens point out that people are communicating seven of each ten minutes they are awake. Forty-five percent of that seven minutes is spent listening. Still, researchers have estimated that we comprehend only about one-fourth of all that is said to us.

#### *LISTENING COMPREHENSION*

Listening comprehension is not just hearing. Beyond the physical ability to hear, listening involves "understanding what is sent to the brain, evaluating the information the brain has received, and, finally, reacting or responding to what has been said."<sup>10</sup> To this basic definition Strother adds detecting the speaker's attitude, making inferences, and drawing conclusions. Effective listeners, note Pearson and Fielding, have four basic skills: (1) phonology (i.e., the ability to distinguish between sounds and to recognize words); (2) syntax (i.e., the ability to pick up clues in the sounds, to recognize statements, questions, and exclamations, to detect the key words and phrases, to determine the end of one word and the beginning of the next, and to use the right meaning when a sound can have more than one); (3) semantics (i.e., knowing what the word represented by the sound signifies); and (4) text structure (i.e., having a sense of how narratives, drama, poetry, etc. are organized). Samuels has identified other qualities associated with effective listening: (1) the intelligence of the listener (i.e., does the listener have the ability to comprehend the message); (2) motivation (i.e., does the listener care enough to work at listening); and (3) kinesics (i.e., does the listener have the ability to decode the nonverbal cues of the speaker).

Different types of listening seem to exist. At the lowest level of the hierarchy is listening at the "phatic communication" level. It involves small talk: "How are you doing?" "How do you figure them Jets?" Listening at this level is done for enjoyment or to gather impressions. The involvement of the listener is related to whether or not he or she has any interest in the Jets or the speaker. The second type of listening is labeled "cathartic communication" by Collins. Here, the listener's role is simply to listen while the speaker airs his or her complaints, discusses a problem, and so on. The listener is passive, merely serving as a sounding board. A third level is "informative communication." At this level, information is shared, new ideas are introduced for consideration, arguments are developed, and agreements are sought. The listener is more involved in two activities. First, he or she must comprehend the speaker's messages. Secondly, he or she must discriminate between facts and opinions, as well as develop a sense of the line of thought being presented. At this level, the listener must remain involved and expects to respond with messages of his own. The most complex listening

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activity, the "persuasive communication" level, calls for the listener to evaluate critically and decide to accept or reject the message.

Bookcassettes operate at the latter two levels of listening— informative communications and persuasive communications. To be an effective medium, the listener must be actively involved and concentrate, just as Sutton suggests.

In their review of research on listening comprehension, Pearson and Fielding found that researchers had been most active in the 1950s and 1960s. Nearly all the findings reported were offshoots of investigations focused on the reading of print. Research in the 1960s revealed a great deal about the process of listening and the prerequisites for effective listening. These researchers also suggested that listening comprehension was a skill that could be taught. Nevertheless, oral communication skills did not receive federal funding until the 1978 amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). However, states were still not required to set aside monies for such programs. A 1985 survey by the Speech Communication Association revealed that only eleven states had identified listening skills as a priority and developed a curriculum for teaching them. Seventeen states had no such curriculum and had no plans to develop one. The remaining states were in various stages of planning. By and large, progress has been left in the hands of individuals such as Gold and Vukelich, who have developed and published individual approaches to the teaching of listening skills. There has been no concerted effort to teach this unique skill.

### *CONNECTIONS AND CONCLUSION*

The connection between listening comprehension skills, the library, and the emergence of the bookcassette should now be made clear. The bookcassette, in the last five years, has become a \$200 million enterprise that is broadening its offerings to include nonfiction titles. This format has become readily accepted by consumers. It has also become, as the *Library Journal* surveys have shown, an important segment of the library's collection; these titles often represent a disproportionately large share of the library's total circulation. Listening, research indicates, is a distinct skill that requires concentrated effort. Listening skills, however, are not systematically being taught.

In the past, libraries have been associated with literacy programs. But the emphasis in these activities has always been on the reading of printed matter, the mainstay of library collections. No reason exists for the library to limit its attention to a single type of literacy associated with only one type of information package. The emergence of the bookcassette and the inclusion of these new information packages in library collections, it would seem, call for a response from the libraries on aural literacy. The addition of nonfiction titles by new audio-publishers and the existence of professional journals in

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law, medicine, and so on in the cassette format add emphasis to the need to address aural literacy in the same fashion libraries have attended to print literacy.

This is not to suggest that libraries become the primary agent in the development of listening skills. That job more properly belongs to the school systems, just as reading does. But the library can still play a role that is analogous to the one the library seems willing to undertake in traditional literacy programs. First, libraries should become aware of groups concerned with aural literacy and programs available for the development of listening skills. Offering publicity and the use of meeting rooms to such groups is a minimal supportive activity. Secondly, librarians need to be made aware of the results of research in listening skills in order to be able to select materials and guide patrons to more useful materials in this format. Thirdly, library education in courses such as storytelling and media services needs to build into the course syllabuses the concept of listening comprehension and the findings of relevant research to better equip new professionals to perform their information-brokering function.

If librarians are to seriously take on the role of omnimedia information centers and broaden their service base, they must be willing and eager to take on new responsibilities. Failure to rise to an opportunity such as that presented by the development of the bookcassette may lead to the final irony. The omnimedia information age arrives, and we are still at the bookstore.

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